RESEARCH ARTICLE

The agency of "doing something": Ethnographic research on subject positions at predominantly White institutions

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Abstract

A small elite liberal arts college in the northeastern United States provides a context for the promotion and proliferation of a discourse of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This article considers projects emergent from a summer research fellowship offered to groups of faculty members and students. We compare the ways in which the group of students led by us and the group of students led by another set of faculty developed questions and explored aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We show that the other group began their efforts by foregrounding work on the production of inequality but ended up with a rather neoliberal subjectivity focused on the exploration of the self and one's feelings. Our group managed to avoid such an outcome, but, unlike the other group, our work got passed over for promotion on the College's website. Our insights seek to provide a context for the transformation of calls to "do something" in the academic institution in which we work into depoliticized representations of difference ripe for institutional display and promotion.

KEYWORDS

agency, diversity equity and inclusion, liberal arts education, neoliberalism, social change

We all know that colleges and universities are neoliberal spaces. I mean there's no question of that. What I am saying here is…I'm extending an invitation [from my research group] to you so that together we could *do something* about it [emphasis in original].

This is a comment made by a faculty advisor of another research group during our work-in-progress session on the discourse of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in predominantly White institutions. Our group consisted of two faculty members and six students, and our project focused on how minoritized students themselves experience and interpret the initiatives, programming, and courses

associated with the DEI initiatives of their college. The authors proposed this research project to a campus-wide center that funds faculty–student collaborative research projects on "social innovation and change," and recruited six undergraduate students as research fellows. During the summer of 2021, the research group met weekly, read relevant anthropological literature on the discourse of DEI, and independently collected ethnographic data on aspects of the representations of minoritized students in DEI discourse at the College and interpretations of such efforts.

The question by the faculty member did not take the authors aback: as anthropologists teaching about issues of inequality and inequity in the context of education, we have often encountered similar questions, from our colleagues as well as our students. In Wang's "anthropology of the university" course, students regularly write discussion questions like "given that we now know the neoliberal nature of a college, what can we do to combat the reproduction of privilege and marginalization of minoritized students?" (also see Wang, 2022). While LaDousa has published about the processes of neoliberalization through the vantage points of experiential education, campus funding initiatives, and faculty life (LaDousa, 2013, 2018, 2019; Lee & LaDousa, 2015), some of their colleagues half-jokingly see them as a scholar who "only thinks" and "does not act." Elsewhere on our campus, social justice-oriented colleagues put together various groups to discuss how "to build community partnership," to "decolonize pedagogy," and, sometimes, to "build an anti-racist institution." These groups receive support for these conversations from various offices/centers at the College. Reproduced in these various activities is a divide between "thinking about something" (discussing issues related to neoliberalism, social injustice, and marginalization) and "doing something about it."

But who is this "we" that "know… colleges and universities… as neoliberal spaces," to quote our colleague introduced above? What does it mean to "do something about it"? What does the "something" and the "it" entail? In this article, the authors use our faculty–student collaborative project to disrupt the assumption of a collective "we" often reproduced in the social justice-oriented discourse of "doing something." We then analyze another faculty–student collaborative project, the one guided by the faculty member providing the opening quote, that makes central the idea of "doing something." The authors argue that assuming a universal "we," as well as holding the imperative of "doing something," constitute vehicles for reproducing a neoliberal form of agency. We also show how the imperative of "doing something" becomes transmuted into an individual affective state. In the end, we demonstrate the importance of conducting ethnographic inquiries on processes of social change in which agency is conceptualized in the context of labor. We ask what labor entails in DEI representational work—who is doing what work for whom—in order to situate agency ethnographically. Particularly crucial to our discussion are the contrasts that emerge between the insights of the students involved in our research project and those of the other group. Our students reveal that the production of representational material for the institution is selective, partial, and relatively onerous, whereas the other project produces an accumulation of cultural forms recognizable as Asian or Asian American and couches identity as a matter of self-discovery and feeling. Instead of asking what "we" "should do," the authors urge that the various subjectivities that are produced to represent inequity be investigated by the very people they target.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

This article focuses on the discourse of "doing something" at what we call Stevens College, a predominantly White, elite, liberal arts institution in the northeastern United States. In 2022, the College enrolls about 2000 students, of which 27 percent are US students of color and 7 percent international students. Important to this article's discussion is the prominence of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" in the institutional life at the College. Institutionally, the College lists "diversity, equity, and inclusion" as one of its institutional priorities. In 2020, the president "launched a new Advisory Council on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to explore how the College could stand in greater solidarity with Black and other historically marginalized community members" (from Stevens College website).[1] Since then, the College created a new webpage on DEI that documents and showcases the activities contributing to the goal of DEI. A new chief

diversity officer was hired in 2022. In terms of admission practice, the College establishes special admission programming in order to attract students from marginalized backgrounds to apply. DEI is also central to the curriculum at the College. Each department is tasked with creating courses under a "Structural, Social, and Institutional Hierarchy" designation, and every student is required to take three such courses before they graduate. Previously a "multicultural student center," a student activity center, was established to serve as "a central resource for exploring intersections between gender, race, culture, religion, sexuality, ability, socioeconomic class, and other facets of human difference." (website). The Center regularly hosts events about the experience of marginalized people (for example, Angela Davis was the speaker in the Center's speaker series in 2023) and is a hub for critically-minded students to congregate and discuss issues related to oppression and marginalization. Lastly, the College boasts a few endowed research fellowships for students and faculty to conduct research projects. Projects that engage with notions of social change and transformation are often encouraged to apply.

It is safe to generalize that concerns about "diversity equity and inclusion" feature prominently in the representation and everyday operation of the College. Indeed, if using the popular term that faculty, students, and college administrators invoke on issues of social justice, the College is "doing" a lot. However, just what is achieved through the "doing"? How do the very students that such "doing" initiatives target experience the "doing"?

NEOLIBERAL AGENCY, LABOR, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Wilson (2018: 2) offers an especially cogent, multifaceted description of neoliberalism as "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life. According to neoliberalism, government's charge is not the care and security of citizens, but rather the promotion of market competition." Harvey (2005) traces early manifestations of neoliberalism to the 1970s in privatization brought about during the Pinochet Dictatorship in Chile and the reduction of social services in the face of mounting debt in New York City. By the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom articulated calls to roll back the welfare state so that wealth might grow in the hands of the few and "trickle downward"—something that growing wealth disparity indicates has not happened (Andersen, 2020; Peck, 2010). Privatization coupled with deregulation have become commonplace in the United States and elsewhere since the 1980s and many of the questions about society and culture asked by anthropologists in the United States since then have been shaped by neoliberal policy (Greenhouse, 2011).

Institutes of higher education have manifested neoliberal transformations in particular ways. In an ethnographic study of administrators and professors, Tuchman (2009) traces the dual mechanisms of an increasing emphasis on shared benchmarks and accountability, on the one hand, and a growing desire for distinction from other institutions through branding, on the other hand. Administrators encourage the proliferation of offices and centers in the institution by which faculty and students might better collaborate—like the one that funded our project—as part of the ambition to make a name for themselves (and move on to other institutions and up in administrative rank). Tuchman stresses that such para-organizations serve to discipline and control faculty and students and serve to advertise the larger institution's productivity and usefulness. In her study of a small liberal arts college, Urciuoli (2022) points out that neoliberal logics of corporate and academic organizations cannot overlap entirely because schools do not offer students jobs—at least by definition. She finds the college infusing representations of students with "skills," often vaguely defined and oriented to communication and problem solving. Both studies stress that institutions of higher education have increasingly urged students and faculty to promote themselves in connection with the institution via loosely defined but highly advertised activities. University and college media and/or development departments are ready to disseminate images of students, faculty, and alumni to attract more applicants and encourage fundraising.

Images of and stories about students successfully bridging the collegiate and the corporate worlds are an ever-increasing feature of schools' self-representations. Students of color and first-generation students

are featured prominently, providing a moral underpinning to neoliberal value (Muehlebach, 2012). At the same time, such representations are problematic for students of color and/or students from working class families (Benson & Lee, 2020; Lee, 2016; Lee & LaDousa, 2015). Discourses of skills do not address their college experiences where differences between their upbringing and that of the largely White and upper middle-class student body are noticeable and often painful (Urciuoli, 2022). Students of color are thus especially implicated in neoliberal discourses: as our project shows, they are hyper-visible in digital and print College promotional materials while their presence on campus is not nearly as easy and unproblematic as that of most of their peers. Representations serving "diversity" discourses often erase the social justice ramifications of student difference in favor of a depoliticized student body in which success is attainable by anyone. Coming to campus can present a transition for students of color that is hidden in collegiate representation of students, and the fact that value is generated from their presence—in effect, their labor—is hidden.

Three theoretical concepts guided our work on the context of neoliberalism in higher education. First, the stories that universities and colleges disseminate rely on and recreate "subject positions"—biographical persons or social roles that are constituted in discursive practices (Agha, 2011; Gee, 2012; Wortham, 2001, 2006). Subject positions like "student of color," "Asian student," "Asian American student," or "first-generation student" are not natural. They emerge within particular venues (like a school) and the people to whom they refer do not always use them and do not always see themselves as best served by them. Thinking about how subject positions get used and to what effects required us to consider the interplay of who was creating a message, about whom the message was created, what previous messages the creator was drawing on, borrowing from, or incorporating, and how the creator positioned themselves with respect to what was being claimed. Pronouns, for example, are especially useful to consider in mapping these dynamics because what is being referred to cannot be understood outside of knowledge about spatial and temporal aspects of what is happening (Fillmore, 1997; Urban, 1989). Pronouns can also be used to understand how speakers position themselves with respect to others and the events in which they are engaged (Wortham, 2001). For example, the professor whose response to our project began with "we all know that colleges and universities are neoliberal spaces" used a pronoun to situate our work, data, and conclusions as obvious to everyone present. He then narrowed the focus to himself and us for dramatic effect, "*I'm* extending an invitation [from my research group] to *you* so that together *we* could *do something* about it…." He issued us a challenge, one that rendered our work as already known as well as relatively inert, and made himself seem ready for action.

Subject positions are not simply different from each other—which is often implied by concepts like "diversity." "Student of color," for example, is not just a category of "student" because the subject position gets undue attention on college and university websites. The fact that subject positions unevenly implicate people such that some people are relatively free from the ramifications of subject positions that might be used to represent them and others are more defined and circumscribed by them drew our attention to our second concept, "agency." Definitions of agency such as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001; see also Duranti, 2004; Kockelman, 2007) bring attention to the ways in which action depends on and is shaped by social roles (like "student of color"), artifacts recognized as significant and valuable (like an image on a college's website), and institutions that house and rely on roles and artifacts (like colleges, the categories of people in them, and all of the material they use to represent those people). The concept of agency implies that people do not equally control the representations of how people use and inhabit subject positions. Gershon (2011) identifies a particular kind of agency with neoliberalism itself whereby one's connections with others are supposed to be negotiated contractually rather than seen as emergent from historically shaped social inequalities and cultural meanings. The world is flattened to individuals negotiating with each other as if they were businesses. We concur with her that neoliberalism should invigorate anthropology given its careful attention to structure, meaning, and ideology.

Finally, value is being produced along with subject positions. In our project, we conceptualized "labor," our third concept, as any activity that produces value for the institution. Broadly understood as "the human effort that pertains to capitalist relations of production," the concept of labor is particularly

useful to unpack "what aspects of concrete historical and sociocultural contexts are encroached upon, co-opted, or transformed by capitalist relations in the process of global accumulation" (Narotsky, 2018, 35). In our case, we pay particular attention to questions about who is doing that labor, under what conditions, and who decides what is of value in the context of higher educational institutions. In our group, we encouraged each other to think carefully about how people and media represented different kinds of students doing different sorts of activities, as well as who might be the audience for such representations. We studied how College publication and reporting depicted people and asked whether it ever registered people problematizing subject positions. We also considered reactions by different kinds of readers to the subject positions reproduced by College publications. The production of representations of students constitutes a key aspect of labor, albeit hidden, that sustains the production of value for Stevens College. We desired to make explicit that College promotional materials urge the use of subject positions without critique or problematization because such representations produce value for the institution. And we asked what happens to the agency of students when to gain recognition in promotional materials they have to be represented in particular ways. Indeed, we focus on discourse and representation in this article because we found that the College deploys language coupled with images as a primary means of making claims about the value of the institution and being a student there.

By paying attention to the use of subject positions in College promotional materials producing value (for people other than the ones represented), we wish to open up what the professor seemed to want to close down—the exploration of just what makes "colleges and universities" "neoliberal spaces." While the professor referred to everyone as "we," as being already in the know, we contend that our students in particular were curious about just what made the College a neoliberal space for them. Each was drawn to a particular dimension of the representation of students, and each developed insights relevant to their experiences as students of color, international students, or students who saw the unequal ways in which neoliberal processes were at work. Before reifying the distinction between saying and doing with a claim about what is already known, the authors point to the particular ways in which neoliberal practices engage only some students for the seeming benefit of all.

ON THE "DOING" OF STEVENS COLLEGE: VOICES FROM SIX STUDENTS' RESEARCH PROJECTS

In the summer of 2021, the authors worked with six undergraduate students on various facets of the discourse of DEI at predominantly White institutions. The project grew from Wang's course on the anthropology of the university, which surveyed existing anthropological literature on the institutional practices of DEI in the context of neoliberalism. Scholars have argued that DEI initiatives are partially transformed in practices of representation that serve to boost institutional images and rankings (LaDousa, 2018, 2019; Lee & LaDousa, 2015; Urciuoli, 2022) and that colleges and universities' institutionalization of "diversity" in effect obscures racism (Ahmed, 2012). This results in the further reification of identity categories, providing grounds on which such categories—that emerged from historically informed power hierarchies—are transformed to mere signifiers of difference, to be incorporated into capitalist regimes of value accumulation (Leong, 2021; Silver, 2020; Warikoo, 2016). The popularity of DEI initiatives aligns neatly with the neoliberal penetration into the institutional life of higher educational institutions (e.g., Tuchman, 2009).

Through the course, Wang and her students noticed that more research can be done on unpacking how race- and class-marked students themselves—including non-White international students—make sense of DEI discourses and related initiatives and programs. Subsequently, Wang and LaDousa proposed a faculty–student collaborative project to center the voices of so-called "diverse" students in PWIs. The authors focused on the "renewed and more comprehensive plan of action to address diversity, equity, and inclusion" at one PWI since the institution recognized the significance of DEI in early 2020. The research questions they proposed were: What subject positions do discourses such as "diversity and inclusion" and "diversity intensive courses" produce? How do students of various racial/

cultural backgrounds interpret such popular discourses at higher educational institutions? The authors then recruited six undergraduate students with some experience in ethnographic research. The research group was "diverse": out of the six students, one identified as a Black Muslim female, two as Latina, one as a female Chinese international student, one as a female South Asian international student (who also describes herself as Brown, albeit ambivalently; more on this below), and one as a male White athlete. The two professors included an Asian identifying female and a White male. Each of the students picked a subtopic related to the DEI initiatives at Stevens and conducted discourse analysis on College materials and ethnographic interviews with people at the College for their own research projects. In summer 2021, the six student researchers and two professors conducted weekly group meetings in which the student researchers shared their individual research proposals under the aforementioned umbrella research topic, presented ethnographic materials collected for their own projects, and workshopped arguments for their papers. Ethnographic materials—in the form of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, and multimedia data—were collected independently by the six student researchers, who designed their own research methods based on the topics of their own projects. For example, in a project on how international students perceive DEI initiatives at the College, the student researcher conducted interviews with five international students, and also analyzed the "international student survival guide" produced by the Office of International Students at Stevens; in another project on the meanings of DEI through the College's Advisory Council, the student researcher collected and analyzed the Council's communication materials circulated to the entire campus, and incorporated some ethnographic interviews with self-identified student activists on campus. Data collection also happened during summer 2021. At the end of the summer, each student researcher wrote up their findings and analyses in their own research papers. The student researchers and two professors then presented on the overall research project during the Fall 2021 semester.

What emerged from these projects is evidence that the points of view of marked students can be critical of the production of underrepresented groups in institutional DEI discourses and can reveal inconsistencies in the discourses themselves. First, many marked students do not identify with institutionally directed DEI discourse. For example, in Student 1's analysis of the campus-wide DEI Advisory Council, she reported student activists' sense of "invisibility," "emotional labor," and "trauma" in regard to its formation. She found that some students see the establishment and work of the DEI Advisory Council as a "recuperation" project, as the Council does not bring in "leaders of the racial justice organizations on campus…the people who are doing the work on the ground." Distancing themselves from the DEI Advisory Council, some students reported that they were further marginalized and alienated as a result of the establishment of the Council. In Student 2's analysis of the College's "inclusive" "family" metaphor on various social media platforms, her informants joked that many marked students would describe the College as "simply bad parents." Using the same family metaphor, Student 2's informants said the students of color are "children who do not get appropriate attention" from the parents, as "they're [the 'bad parents' are] gonna cater towards them [the seventy-five percent White children]." The project by Student 3 focused on DEI initiatives in the College's fundraising campaign. Student 3 wrote that the DEI initiatives are buried under the production of a universal student figure (also see Urciuoli, 2016) "who is 'liberally educated,' and 'capable of making the world a better place' without ever explaining what this means." Her informants said that rarely does such a universal figure reflect the lived realities of students of color, and the College's slogan for its fundraising campaign is instead used to cynically describe the neoliberal nature of the College's administration.

While the first three student projects speak to ways in which students of color disagree with and subsequently distance themselves from institutionally directed DEI initiatives, the next two student projects show that for some other race- and class- marked students, the DEI initiatives produce ambivalence and confusion. In Student 4's research on non-White international students' understanding about the meanings of "diversity and inclusion," she argues that non-White international students "face a disconnect between how their peers perceive them versus how they perceive themselves" since "the categories that Americans have for people of color…make it confusing for international students in their experiences because they are treated according to those categories

even though they may not fully identify with them." Student 4 draws from her personal experience to illustrate this point: although being perceived as a Brown person in the United States, she recounts that the category of "brown" does not exist for her in India, where she was born and went to school before enrolling in a predominantly White institution in America. There, in contrast, Student 4 reports that class and caste backgrounds are the key vectors marking individuals' positionalities. In another project on the representations of students of color on College social media platforms, Student 5 shows how students of color simultaneously do and do not appreciate the portrayals of themselves on the College's website, as well as on its Instagram and Twitter accounts. For example, Student 5 finds a student of color explaining that "the College does a great job hiring faculty and staff of color," and noticing that "acknowledging success [of students of color] is always a good thing." But, his informant also notes, "[marked students] must earn [their spot] on campus even after matriculation." Additionally, his informants suggest that many students of color would like themselves to be featured not only as "talking points of achievements or representations of a diverse school campus climate," but also, as "other kinds of achievements, successes, and sometimes even everyday actions."

Finally, Student 6's project shows that DEI initiatives ironically help many marked students to take up the marginalized subject position that the College allots to them. Student 6 explored students' experience of a summer program initiated for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. An official initiative of the College, this 5-week summer program is designed to "help students create a sense of ownership, to ease transitions and to support [the College's] curriculum with a well-rounded approach that makes success possible." Although admission to this special program is not race-based, the program is folklorically known as the College's "diversity" recruitment effort. While the participants remembered the program as "harsh" and "disciplinary," and leading some "to mental breakdowns," Student 6's informants also reported that this program "makes them a bit more confident." In terms of the different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, one informant mentioned that the summer program taught them to know that they "have so much to bring to the table, such as culture, social aspects, and academics… and that you [the marked students] deserve to be there [the College]." In another post on the same program's Instagram site, an anonymous participant wrote that this program "helped me improve my communication skills… and to put myself out there more on campus and network with people, along with finding research opportunities to take on over the summer" (Program Instagram post). In this way, the summer program accentuates the marked students' sense of lack, helping these students to take up a marginalized and deficit subject position in a predominantly White institution.

Together, these student-led projects show how DEI initiatives are shaped by the larger neoliberal institutional context and that such initiatives reinforce the default Whiteness in PWIs (for example, Ahmed, 2012; Urciuoli, 2022). However, these projects also demonstrate the different relationships that marked students develop among the total set of initiatives that aim to create one diverse, inclusive, and equitable college campus. All the DEI initiatives mentioned here are nested under the College's website on "tracking our [DEI] progress." Yet in fact, each domain of production investigated by the students in the group relies on specific offices of the College, positions of the administrators, histories of representational practices, and media through which representations are conveyed. And each student's project shows that the reproduction of inequality is complex and emerges from a very particular set of circumstances. In other words, the marked students do *not* assume a universal subject position when it comes to the College's DEI initiatives. The student research projects hence show a slippage in the process of racialization on contemporary American college campuses: on the one hand, marked students are assumed to be part of an unexamined "we" with shared capacities and interests in social justice and diversity; on the other, the racialization of marked students is articulated through highly individual discourses of identity. This slippage then begs the question: Given how the DEI initiatives have shaped marked students' subject position vis-à-vis the College differently, how productive would it be to organize actions of "doing" without considering these different views?

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF "DOING": THE "ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE" PROJECT AS AN EXAMPLE

In this section, we turn to the "Asian/Asian American experience" project, partially led by the professor whose challenge to us was reported in the introduction. In doing so, we illustrate how ethnographic analysis of projects of "doing something" yields insights on the socioculturally mediated nature of agency. We first detail the neoliberal context of undergraduate student research. We then move on to examine the representation of "Asianness" resulting from this project, as well as how such representations figured into the brand of the College as a PWI. In highlighting some of the pitfalls of this project, we invite the readers to consider what it means to engage with DEI discourses such that institutions find them useful and, ultimately, reconsider the distinction between "doing" and "thinking."

"Doing" and institutional branding

First, it is important to note the particular context of faculty-student research projects at the College. Both the authors' projects on the discourse of DEI and the "Asian experience" projects are funded by an endowed Center dedicated to providing resources for students to "combine academic knowledge with practical skills as they engage in public affairs through research, service-learning, lectures, discussion, and practice." The Center website states that their programs serve as opportunities for students to "develop the important qualities of a 'changemaker'—creativity, understanding, self-awareness, and empathy." Each year in February, the Center sends out a call for different types of proposals, one of which encourages undergraduate students to identify and "collaborate closely with a faculty advisor, work on a full-time basis for 10 weeks, submit a twenty-five-page paper or equivalent final product, and present their research in the fall or spring." In return, each Student Research Fellow receives a stipend from the Center to support their research endeavors. Faculty are also compensated for their advising labor, albeit the faculty's compensation is notably less compared to that of the student research fellows. The Center maintains an active media presence, including an official website hosted under the College's website, and publicly accessible social media websites (such as Facebook and Instagram). These sites frequently publish short snippets of the research projects funded by the Center's summer research project.

The Asian/Asian American experience project is featured heavily on both the Center's social media sites and the College's website. In summer 2021, the Center published two Instagram posts about this research project, featured the research group using an Instagram takeover, and promoted the research group's final product, a website and an Instagram page with a logo, via the Center's Instagram page. The website consists of a landing page with a picture of the College in the background with the title of the project, a page presenting a testimonial of a project member (reviewed below), a page with images from movies with Asian actors, a page listing three project goals, and a playlist of songs curated by project members "by Asian and Asian American Artists." Tellingly, the goals—"Using historical research to trace the history of Asian and Asian Americans at the College in order to understand how we got here today; Discover quantitative patterns within the College community by highlighting general and shared experiences between students, faculty and alumni; and Examine the Asian and Asian American experience through interviews with students, employees, alumni, and offices on campus"—treat the identity categories as fixed destinations unrelated to other categories, and disconnected from and impervious to the College's use of them to represent students and others. With the support of the Office of Communication, the College also published a news entry entitled "Amplifying Asian American voices," including a screenshot of the student researchers' zoom meeting to represent the research. The Center's description is included at the bottom of the College's news entry.

All these media representations focus less on the content of the research project than the students' labor involved in the creation of the product. Indeed, it is the Student Research Fellow's "doing" that is heavily showcased in these posts: the Student Research Fellows—what a student called "our team"—are

depicted working in a Zoom meeting; during the Instagram takeover, the research is represented by a research member flipping through the College's archive material and editing a PowerPoint presentation; on the Center's Instagram page, the project presentation announcement is a visual that includes the title of that project, and yet another team zoom meeting screenshot (twelve non-White faces) along with the project's logo. Ironically, the basic information about the content of the research (what is the research question, the methods of inquiry, etc.) is missing, as well as the finding/argument of the project.

It is not difficult to discern how this project of "doing something" becomes part of the branding of the Center and the College. That is, the student research projects funded by the Center constitute examples of what Handler (2008) terms para-curricular programs. Developed to reside outside and parallel to the regular curriculum, the para-curricular programs—such as first year seminars, off-campus engagement programs, and undergraduate research opportunities—are increasingly popular in higher educational institutions in the name of fulfilling pedagogical functions. At the same time, such para-curricular programs fulfill another corporate facing function: the programs—in particular, the outcomes of them, taken in the form of the products of student research and the cultivation of skills—can be used as pitches to the corporate world, showcasing the (neoliberal) value of an otherwise abstract liberal arts education (Urciuoli, 2003). Contextualizing the emergence and popularity of these para-curricular programs, anthropologists demonstrate that these programs are designed to showcase a neoliberal form of subjectivity, and the programs often reproduce neoliberal notions and discourse, including the obsession with "skills," "giving back (often to an empty signifier called 'the community')" and "passions for making change" (Wang, 2022; LaDousa, 2013, 2018; Handler, 2013; Hickel & Khan, 2012; Urciuoli, 2016).

The Asian/Asian American experience project then provides perfect raw materials for the branding of the Center as well as the College. From the perspectives of the Center and the College, the value of undergraduate research is to showcase the productiveness of the students when classes are not in session. As the College recognizes "diversity, equity, and inclusion" as an institutional strategic priority, the Asian/Asian American experience becomes all the more attractive, as it can be seen as an example to demonstrate that institutional resources are available for racially marked students (and their research on/about racial justice issues), thus justifying the institution's progressive image. This also explains why it was the students themselves, rather than the content of the research, that was highlighted the Center's announcement and the College's new entry. Originally conceptualized as a project foregrounding the marginalized voices in a PWI, the Asian/Asian experience project is then ironically reconnected to promotional interests, helping the Center to fulfill its mission of creating "changemakers." The representation of this project is recontextualized into the branding of the College, coopting its original political purpose (that was narrated as evident by the professor who issued us the "doing something" plea).

Imagining the value of "research"

This is not to say that the student research fellows do not participate in the reproduction of a (politically progressive) neoliberal subjectivity. One notable example is the design choice of their research. Instead of writing a research paper, the research group published their research results on a website entitled "Asians at the College" and an Instagram page entitled "the Asian medium." In explaining this designing choice, the "Asians at the College" website published the following note, written by a student research fellow:

> Combining my interests and passion for films (the subject of a course) and desire to make a better college experience for myself, I decided to take action and *do something* to better my life and for other Asian and Asian American student at the College. This project just started out with me wanting to watch a bunch of cool movies and to produce scholarly work in the field of cinema. However, realizing the social impact this project could have for other people…the project took a whole different spin. After inviting two other

colleagues onto the project and producing a hefty report, I am glad that I had the oppor-
tunity to bring a dream to life.

[Authors' emphasis]

Here, the student researcher compares their previous research project on Asian film with the current web-
site project. In doing so, they articulate a distinction between the thinking and learning that happens within
a classroom and that happens outside of a class. They see their previous (winter) project on film as "pro-
duc[ing] scholarly work in the field of media," whereas the website project as simultaneously "[having] social
impact…for other people" and a "[transformation of a] dream to life" of the student themselves. While the
"other people" and the "social impact" remain unspecified (i.e., Who are the "other people"? What does
"better [the lives for] other Asian and Asian American student" mean?), embedded in this narration is that
the website project fulfills the passion of the student, and that it enables the realization of their "dream"
(whatever is entailed in this "dream" also remains unspecified, apart from the realization of a website).

Therefore, the designing choice demonstrates that students themselves have already partially taken
up a neoliberal form of agency in their conceptualization of research. Rather than thinking about con-
ducting research as a process of learning something about the specifics of an unknown topic and/or
how research is done in a particular discipline, the process of conducting research is primarily outward-
facing (albeit to an unknown audience) and product-oriented (in the form of coming up with a certain
product that has "social impact"). This imagination of conducting "research" fits into the neoliberal
liberal arts education environment (see Handler, 2018) since the "products" embody the acquisition
of transferable skills in the employment market. By centering research on a minoritized identity, the
student research fellows then take up the opportunity of conducting research, expanding their labor in
doing research to provide value to an unspecified audience.

What is more ironic, though, is the inaction after the promissory note of "doing." Despite the group's
mentioning of "proposing steps that can be taken to improve…life on the hill for the College's Asian
and Asian American students" and "designing a thoughtful way forward" during the final presentation,
the project website and the Instagram page have not been updated. As the student research fellows and
the professors are located in disparate majors, class years, and departments, it remains unclear what the
"way forward" consists of. While the labor entailed in doing research has indeed provided value for the
Center and the College, it is unclear what the student researchers learned through the process, other
than fulfilling the passion of the "I," a point we take up in later section of this article.

The representation of "Asianness"

The heavy emphasis on the "I" is also present in the group project's representation of "Asianness." That
is, rather than unpacking how different sets of circumstances in history gave rise to the meanings of
being "Asians" at a PWI, the research group treats this subject position (or identity category) as evident,
obvious, and already known. During the oral presentation of their project, the group members reported
that they read *Racial Formation in the United States* by Omi and Winant (2015) and projected the cover of
the book on the shared Zoom screen. However, the book and its themes of race- and identity-formation
were absent for the rest of the presentation. Likewise, in a news article published on the College's web-
site detailing the project, one of the students on the project explained, "We spent 2 weeks, with meetings
three times a week, trying to talk about critical race theory…. In order to study race, you have to know
what race is and how it came to be." Although the student is careful to establish the fact that much time
was spent on the subject, there is no indication in the rest of the article that critical race theory was
brought to bear on the project and its progression.

The project members divided themselves into three teams oriented to "history," "statistics," and
"narratives." History included perusal of the student newspaper for mentions of "Asians," statistics
prompted a 22-question Likert scale survey on Asians and Asian Americans, and narratives in-
cluded 10- to 20-min interviews with dozens of students, alumni, and employees. The group made

a website, "The Asian and Asian American Experience," where each of the three teams made content for a webpage. "Asian" and "Asian American" remain predetermined identity categories that individuals inhabit to their relative benefit or detriment throughout. This becomes particularly evident in a project member's reflections on "identity crises" experienced during college. The student states that "figuring out what you want to do with your life, figuring out what you want to study, can be really challenging when you're also trying to figure out who you are based on your ethnicity, race, and culture" (Center project website). Rather than figuring out who one is or might be within the context of a predetermined set of possibilities, the Asian/Asian American experience project represents a multitude of subject positions flatly, as a single image. Another student hints that the category of Asian/Asian American might itself be complicated by racialized distinctions and inequalities: "I came up for the idea of this project [a seed project for 'The Asian and Asian American Experience']…mainly out of my general unhappiness and experience as a Vietnamese-American at [Stevens] College. Coming from Houston, Texas, I felt extremely out of place here and oftentimes lonely as I felt like no one on campus could relate to how I was feeling." But the student does not invoke critical race theory to make sense of a category like "Vietnamese-American" and its disposition to other American nationalities and/or Asianness. Rather, the student concludes with a focus on the self: "To the…fellow Asian and Asian American community members…, thank you for taking the time to explore our work and unique experiences." In both students' cases, a flattening of perspective is achieved by using "I" as the locus of experience and leaving the self's embodiment in a racially- or politically-charged identity category (Asian, Vietnamese-American) relatively unexplained.

This flattening representation of Asianness mirrors the approach taken by the College's very own DEI initiative. For example, as a part of the its DEI initiative, the College organized a few "listening sessions" in which minoritized students were uncritically grouped under existing identity categories, such as "Asian/Pacific Islander Students, Interfaith/Spirituality Students, Latina/o/x Students, and BIPOC Alumni." Similar to how the Asian experience project website folded together an Asian/Asian American music playlist, the goals of the research project, and the student researchers' personal narratives, the College also published a bullet-point style list on its website that aims to "track the progress" on building a diverse, equitable community. In the "progress list," an art exhibition of an Ethiopian artist, the College's admission statistics, and the 10-year anniversary celebration at the campus hub on the "facets of human difference" are put parallel to each other. Both the College's DEI initiative and the Asian experience project illustrate how a neoliberal form of agency—through which workers craft their value according to what they imagine themselves to bring to a company—enables depoliticized and uncritical representations on political issues.

Important to note is that the faculty–student collaboration and institutional projects that are underpinned by the notion of "doing something" show that neoliberal forms of agency work on multiple scales. Just as the College puts together a "progress list" to illustrate its value to people outside the institution (see also, Urciuoli, 2022), the students, faculty, or endowed Center includes the Asian experience project to represent more value to their peers and future employers alike. The Asian experience project has morphed into a content entry to some students' LinkedIn profile pages, as well as the bios in some students' Instagram and Facebook profiles. The project's website becomes another student research website within the College's umbrella, and can be added to the College's DEI "progress list." The very process of "doing something" becomes a self-fashioning project for the presentation of the self and facilitates the production of neoliberal agency and value on multiple scales. From individual students and faculty to research groups and endowed centers, to the institution as a whole, this way of "doing something" encourages one to craft accounts and expend labor in particular ways to provide value. Different from the corporate world where workers' labor can add value to an entity other than themselves, in higher educational institutions, students (and faculty alike) perform labor on social change not only to add value to the institutions, but also add an entry of "doing something" to their resumes. As neoliberal projects take scalability as a given (Tsing, 2012), this "doing something" project illustrates how neoliberal forms of agency are replicated in "making change" projects.

FROM "DOING" TO FEELING: HOW "DOING" EVADES ANALYSIS

Lastly, important to note in the Asian/Asian American experience project is the general but abrupt shift from the contextualization of categories and their users required by critical race theory to a focus on feelings experienced by individuals involved in their project. Indeed, in the College's Instagram entry, the student narration of the origin of the project (quoted above), as well as in the project's final presentation, words describing feelings such as "excitement," "passion," and "fulfilling" frequently appear. Although all narratives invoke "critical race theory" (as the project's guiding theoretical framework), the focus of attention in these narratives quickly turns to the affect inspiring the project's formulation, on the one hand, and resulting from participation in the project, on the other hand. Consistently, negative affect—for example, finding materials in the library archive, not feeling belonging in the College—is transformed into positive affect as the project itself and its dissemination come to be signs of the students' agency. Here, affect—located in an individual rather than in a context or perspective—becomes the focus. "Doing" thus becomes a feeling. And, categories that include others besides the self are rendered relevant only insofar as one feels about one's embodiment of them.

Critical in this analysis is the work of feeling in the process of "doing something." Existing ethnographic accounts of "doing"—in contexts such as global development and education reform—have long pointed out that technical expertise often takes precedence over critical analyses on the situation at hand, and as a result, the intervention programs often present depoliticized solutions to structural issues. This process of "rendering technical" (Li, 2007) also occurs in other arenas of school reforms (Lashaw, 2010; Sims, 2017). Here, our ethnography on the "doing" shows that an affective state constitutes a new vehicle through which structural problems are depoliticized. In other words, in a neoliberal institutional context, actions of "doing something" are transmuted into a matter of feeling. This transmutation provides a vehicle for the "doers"—individuals and institutions alike—to self-fashion a politically progressive identity, which is achieved through the labor of the "doing" of minoritized students, and finally gets to be expressed through the production of an affective state. The process of transmutation discards the material and structural conditions that the "doings" set out to challenge. In addition to a politically progressive identity, such an affective state becomes a core product provided by the neoliberal educational institutions. Colleges and universities become committed to "the transformation of society through critique… yet… its [higher educational institution's] hidden curriculum reflects the material conditions of higher education and reinscribes academic accumulation" (la paperson, 2017; also see Patel, 2016).

Moreover, these processes that translate "doing" into feeling can easily evade critical analyses. As "user experience" has become the ideal product that higher educational institutions should provide to its customers (Urciuoli, 2018), the affective state resulting from projects of "doing" becomes a taken-for-granted moral good, especially when these projects are concerned with issues such as social justice and social change. This individual positive feeling can be cited as evidence to support marked individuals without achieving accountable outcomes; for marked individuals, these positive feelings also help to disguise the mechanisms through which their labor becomes valuable. We point out that attention to questions of labor and socioculturally mediated forms of agency could defamiliarize this affective state, revealing how efforts for social change are depoliticized in the process of "doing."

CONCLUSION: ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES AS REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF "DOING SOMETHING"

The authors do not mean to erase the possibilities of "doing" advocated by the professor. Rather, we wish to caution against the unproblematic valorization of the idea of "doing something," also described as "activism" and "fostering social change," both within and beyond educational institutions. What is at stake here is to think about "what happens when intellectual inquiry is sacrificed to an intensely politicized moment, whether inside or outside an academic institution" (Brown, 2001: 41), particularly when the structure of higher educational institutions is set up to produce neoliberal subjects (see

Gershon, 2011; Urciuoli, 2016). The projects discussed in this article—including our student projects and the Asian experience project—show that the "doing something" projects are mediated by particular sets of circumstances in which these projects are situated, that the "doing something" projects can ironically transform political actions to individual affect.

It is important to mention that an alternative model exists that decries academic critiques of higher education because they see them as complying with the knowledge regime that banishes non-bourgeois approaches to an "undercommons" (Harney & Moten, 2013). Indeed, Harney and Moten urge Black, queer, and people marked in other ways to reject the university's legitimation in favor of their knowledge already realized through experience. Our student projects would point out that educational professionalization is not the only way that institutions of higher education legitimize themselves and that anthropological fieldwork has much to reveal that ostensibly goes unrecognized by the institution. Our work was ignored not because it was insufficiently academic but, rather, because it could not be used to celebrate the virtues of attendance, participation, and passion.

For this reason, the authors propose to maintain a productive tension between political action and analytical inquiry. Rather than rejecting critique because it emerges from within an academic discipline—anthropology—we would like to highlight the importance of ethnographically examining political actions in situ, and to add to questions of agency, labor, and value production in action-oriented research within and beyond higher educational institutions. This can be done through taking seriously the complexities and contradictions emergent in the process of "doing something." As the two research projects discussed above show, the College's DEI initiatives allowed for different responses on the part of the minoritized students, and our analysis of the process of the Asian experience project shows that "doing something" ironically facilitates the production of one singular flattening subject position and also reinforces neoliberal agency. These two projects also illustrate that "doing something"—on the part of the institutions and the students alike—often reproduces the very form of agency the institution advocates and promotes. The race to produce and publish materials and content (whether documenting progress or injustice) more often than not misses critical discussions on *what* is produced, who produces it, and who benefits from such production, not to mention what those represented might have to say in the wake of their own representations. Asking these questions may leave open the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate events.

We do not reside outside of the neoliberal context of higher educational institutions. After all, our project on the discourse of DEI is also funded by the same faculty–student collaborative research program designed to cultivate changemakers. Yet, we note that none of the staff at the Center or at the Office of Communication at the College reached out to us or our students about their summer project for a news entry. Meanwhile, we note that several minoritized students who attended the project's presentation became interested in the same topic and reported to the authors that they signed up for further courses in similar areas. Some of our students built on their summer work and conducted their senior thesis research in adjacent topics. One activist minded student included the papers resulting from this project as background readings of their organizing efforts. In Wang's subsequent course, a few students who attended the project presentation mentioned the project's arguments in discussions on topics such as elitism, capitalism, and education. The curiosity generated by this summer project is a key result, albeit a not-easily-marketable one. The labor entailed in this project adds less value to the branding of the College than student learning. Pedagogically speaking, the authors consider the capacity of interrogating one's context an encouraging element of "doing something."

In conclusion, we leave with some questions produced by our project as well as some lessons we learned that might be of value to an ethnographic approach to the production of subject positions in institutions of higher education in the grip of the neoliberal maximization of value.

Questions

- How do institutions and politically-minded actors approach the call of "doing something"?
- In what ways might the notion of "doing something" be informed and contextualized ethnographically?

- What kind of discourse is (re)produced in the process? And by whom?
- Who is represented in calls to "do something" and what are the possibilities and dilemmas of their responses?
- What are the contours of power within the field of action itself?
- What are the possibilities and limitations for action for different subjects?
- How does "doing something" lead to divergent visions of the "good" and what kind of moral authority is produced through the idea of "good work" (c.f., Lashaw et al., 2017)

Lessons

- Be suspicious of dualisms created between "thinking" and "doing" and treat moments when the dualism is deployed as ethnographic.
- Note what seems to be achieved in the moment, by whom, and to whose benefit.
- Maintain a productive tension between "thinking" and "doing."
- Offer as much as is possible the chance for represented subjects to reflect on the institutions and practices of value creation in which they are enmeshed.
- Support and encourage the articulation of insights of represented subjects. This too is doing something.

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ENDNOTE

1 We cite the Stevens College website without including the web address throughout to preserve anonymity.

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